

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 517

CS 211 922

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TITLE Growing through Literature.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, March 27-31, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; English (Second Language); Ethnic Groups; High Schools; *Literature Appreciation; Motivation Techniques; Personal Narratives; Special Education; Student Interests; *Student Motivation; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS Life Cycles

ABSTRACT

"Growing through Literature" is a curriculum using Joan M. and Erik H. Erikson's theory of the Life Cycle as a structure for selecting and teaching literature to inner-city high school students at Brighton High School in Massachusetts. The program consists of four component parts: Journals, Selected Stories, Discussion, and Autobiography. By viewing the film "Everyone Rides the Carousel" and reading short stories from "Child Development through Literature," students encounter fear, anger, jealousy, compassion, courage, and values directly related to everyday life and relationships. Teachers of English as a Second Language, Special Education, and Theater Arts have been able to adapt this program to meet their needs. (NH)

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Session 11.10

GROWING THROUGH LITERATURE

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American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, Ca
March 27-31, 1989

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GROWING THROUGH LITERATURE

Growing Through Literature is a curriculum that I designed using Joan M. and Erik H. Erikson's theory of the Life cycle as a structure for selecting and teaching literature to inner-city high school students. I had been teaching elementary school previously and needed to understand the students in this often difficult age group. The student population I teach at Brighton High School is mainly Hispanic, Southeast Hispanic, Southeast Asian, and Black.

After consulting with Dr. Ralph Mosher who was teaching Adolescent Development at Boston University, I read several doctoral theses on adolescent development that he recommended. The work of Nickholas Etchevenny, Education in Persuasive Speaking to Promote Psychological Growth; George Mager, Improvisational Drama as a Way to Learn About Oneself; Theodore Katz, The Arts as a Vehicle for the Exploration of Personal Concerns, and Dr. Mosher's book, Adolescents' Development and Education provided me with information and inspiration.

Combining this data with my personal interest in the work of the Eriksons I put together a program that consisted of four component parts: Journal, Selected Stories, Discussion and Autobiography using the Life Cycle as a framework. I believed that adolescents' interest in learning about their development could be used to stimulate their interest in literature, writing, and discussion and vice-versa. My aim was to motivate

and communicate in ways meaningful to my students about themselves and their lives and also to me in getting to know and understand them.

Each year I make changes as I perceive what works effectively in my teaching and as I become aware of how the literature expresses the Life Cycle and how the literature and the Life Cycle expands the students' understanding of their own life experience. I attended a seminar with the Eriksons in 1986, "Perspectives on the Life Cycle". In 1987, Tim Harden, a graduate student from Cambridge College conducted interviews with my class and was impressed by the interest in the Life Cycle which had already evolved. Encouraged by this report, I have used the Life Cycle as more than a mere structure, but have integrated it with each part of the program.

Every fall I will now show the film, Everyone Rides the Carousel, an animated film of the eight stages. This film is both informative and amusing and the students laugh and cry and thoroughly enjoy it. It strikes home. In connection with this I provide charts of the psychosocial Life Cycle especially designed for this purpose.

I present these stages on at a time to be class and discuss what is meant by the particular words so they understand the significance of them. We then in class read the story or stories selected for this stage. They ask questions which we as a group answer trying to draw out both the literal and emotional content of the story. Then we have discussion in

which the major portion is carried out by the students and I act as referee and facilitator. After this we write about we come to understand.

Most of these short stories that we use are from Child Development Through Literature, a carefully researched anthology of stories edited by Landau, Epstein and Stone, although our approach is inevitably on stage five because identity stage is what these students are experiencing and is naturally most relevant. These stories about fear, anger, jealousy, compassion, courage, and values directly involve everyday life and all relationships. The stories preceding stage five provide the students with insight into their growing years.

In the first stage Infancy the crises is the balancing of Trust vs. Mistrust. The story, The Door of Life, with the outcome of a sense of Hope, the first and basic strength, describes the relationship between the mother and her newborn in which trust is developed. After reading the story, students are amazingly eager to write about their experiences of trust and mistrust. Jim, a student who has failed to graduate because of absenteeism, is one of the best writers in the class and beautifully illustrates his understanding of trust. Moreover he comes regularly. "There are a hundred ways or more to show your trust towards someone, but there is one that is called true trust. This trust involves your trusting yourself which is very hard for most of us to do. A person with this

must trust in himself has a lot of good in his personality. He can sit down and gather all his thoughts together and figure out what he has done to be distrustful and without lying to himself. Everyone knows you cannot lie to yourself, maybe to someone else but not you. To me trusting yourself is the greatest trust of all." A for you, Jim--you really got it.

Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt is a more difficult assignment and especially important in their understanding of the strength Will and how shame and doubt can curb reckless willfulness. We read the story about the toddler Faith and her growing self-confidence in Trio For Three Gentle Voices. I give clear examples of autonomy, and ask the students to go as far back in memory as they can. I will quote once more from a student's work because her example is so on target. "I remember when I was in the first grade...well actually I don't. But my mother does; this incident concerning autonomy is one that she has told on several occasions."

"When I was in the first grade my mother told me that each day I could walk to and from school. Since we only lived a short distance from school she felt that it would be all right. To my mom it was a short distance, but to me it was a great journey. I was to walk three houses down, cross the bridge and at the end of the bridge was the school. Mom was determined that by Monday I would know the way like the back of my hand. so we spent the whole weekend walking to and from school. By Monday I was a total wreck, not only was I nervous about the

first day of school, I was positive I was never going to get there. But mom had faith in me, she gave me my lunch and a kiss and sent me on my way. I boldly went out the door, yelling, screaming, and begging my mother to come with me; but she had to go to work and I had to go to school. So off I went to where no first grader had gone before. To my surprise and everyone else's I made it there and back and had a great day. I couldn't wait till tomorrow. I was very proud of myself and so was everyone else." The teacher was very proud, too.

The same procedure is repeated with stage three-- Initiative vs. Guilt with the strength to be developed -- a sense of Purpose. Then four. Industriousness vs. Inadequacy with the strength to be developed Competence. We focus next on stage five right where they are and we discuss Identity and Identity Confusion. A series of stories are introduced that have a distinct emotional theme. The focus is on Who am I? as students study emotions that are universal yet uniquely represented in these stories. They empathize with Peter's fear in The Dog; sympathize with Margot when the children on Venus treat her cruelly; wonder about Tucker's anger in the White Circle. Their writing which recaptures the main characters situation and reflects an understanding of their own emotions. As one student wrote: "Courage is the topic I like the most. I like all of them, but I guess I like this one because I'm the adventurous type. I like to know and explore my fears. This alone takes some type of courage. I like to go by

Socrates motto: "Know thyself." This student seems to have come by an image of himself as a courageous person well on his way to a sense of personal-Identity.

Discussion

Discussion is always a high point. It gives the students a chance to be playful about learning as well as serious. Discussion questions may be about development, or some aspect of the story, or the Life Cycle and invite inquiry. For example, we read Winter Night which describes the loneliness a young person can feel and how helpful the role of an understanding person can play. Afterwards I ask in what ways can a teacher help her students in class to be more empathetic with one another? What can you do to tell a person about their hurt?

Students break into small groups with one acting as recorder. The responses are wonderfully thoughtful and astonishingly informative. Involvement is immediate because of the brainstorming, the interaction, and the sharing of ideas. Some sessions are taped which records lively responses to be enjoyed by others. Students need the opportunity to interact in this way and so we try to make the program organized and relevant. They really relish the openness. A good discussion can bring everyone closer. We all feel revitalized, including me.

Journal

After the stories are read and discussed, the assigned

work is recorded in the journal mentioned earlier which each student takes home for himself. Also included in the journal is their initial autobiography in which each student tells his interests, activities and goals. These autobiographies serve as windows into their lives for me and for each other. The third entry in the journal is their initial response to the story. These questions ask the usual who, why, when, where and how of the story and first impressions of characters and scenes; I pursue this further by asking questions which require more reflection and thought. For example, in All Summer In a Day, we ask: "Where does the story take place?" or "How old are the children?" or "What is your reaction to the climate on Venus?" My further questions are "What metaphor does the author use to describe the sun?" "What metaphor does the author use to describe the sun?" "What are Margot's unusual reactions when she takes a shower?" "How do you think the children feel when they realize what they have done and go down the hall to release her?"

Autobiography

Finally they undertake to compose their autobiography. To our great surprise -- they just love to do this. Of course what they have learned from the stories, from the journal and information from the discussions are useful for this purpose. They love to look back on what they wrote earlier. Even the pressure of final exams and the prospect of reading tests around the corner does not deter most students from the

engrossing task of writing their life-stories. They select four or five of the stories that seem relevant and compare their remembered experience to the experience of that main character. I suggest the reflection -- "In September I thought, now in May I think... These stories are meaningful..." is the for that may be used as a guide.

The following is the autobiography of Angel Jiminian, a most philosophical and sensitive student if ever I had one. What a story!

"During the year we read many short stories. As we read them, we realized how much they referred to life. I personally could relate to these stories because in one way or another I had similar experiences. Of course, there were two or three I couldn't, but in those cases I put myself in their shoes."

"We read My Oedipus Complex by Frank O'Connor. The story was about a little boy of about five years who was in love with his mother and wanted to marry her. His father was away for a time and upon his return from the army he became jealous of him because his mother spent more time with his father and seemed to ignore him."

"As a child I had an experience similar to the boy in My Oedipus Complex though there was a difference. I was not in love with my mother, I was in love with my cousin. I think the reason I felt this way was because every time I was at my aunt's house when I was a baby, my cousin would put me on the bed and kiss me to death. Also, I felt jealous when she got a

boyfriend and got married. The story, My Oedipus Complex, is a good story. It has helped me understand my feelings as a child."

"We also read Luke Baldwin's Vow by Morley Callaghan. This story is about a boy named Luke Baldwin. His parents died when he was young and he had to go live with his Uncle Henry on a farm. Uncle Henry was a practical man and looked up to by many. Luke's closest friend was his dog, Dan. Dan was an old dog and blind in one eye. One day his uncle took a good look at the old dog and decided he wasn't worth his keep, so he paid a man to go drown the dog. Luke then proceeded to find a way to change his uncle's mind. He asked the advice of a man he knew. The man's advice was to appeal to his Uncle Henry's practical nature."

"Luke Baldwin's Vow is a very beautiful story. It reminded me of a similar experience I had when I was faced with a problem as a child. In my neighborhood there are many animals that lived in the wooded areas close to our building. The kids sometimes would kill the animals and this upset me. I went home and told my mother about it. She gave me a good solution. The next time I saw the kids kill an animal I reasoned with them and explained they should have pity because animals live such a short time in comparison with humans. From then on the problem was solved."

"Another story we read was A Member of the Wedding by Carson McCullor. The story was about a girl of about fourteen

years of age. Her name was Frankie. She was going through an identity crises. Her behavior was strange and weird. And coming to the climax of the story, she had thought that by being a member of the wedding would solve her problem. After being embarrassed in front of the wedding guests, she realized she had been wrong and began to face up to reality."

"A Member of the Wedding reminded me of a similar situation I went through in my life and also it was the facing up to reality that caused me to find myself.

A&P was a short story written by John Updike. It was about a boy named Sam. Sam was a cashier in a supermarket. One day these girls in bikinis came into the store to buy something for their mothers. Upon seeing the girls and the way they were dressed, the manager started yelling at them and treating them very rudely. Sam didn't think the manager should have spoken to the girls the way he did so he stuck up for the girls and quit his job. I enjoyed reading A&P because it made me think of the many times I have stood up for what I believed in. It's never easy by any means to say no when everyone is saying yes."

"At the beginning of the school year I wasn't quite sure of some things, but by reading the many stories I was able to gain insight into some of my feelings, emotions, and past experiences. Therefore, I have changed in some ways and I have matured."

Angel's autobiography speaks for itself and more than

speaks for the others in the group. This year students will use the same guidelines for their autobiographies, but will include what they have learned about the Life Cycle, and the stages they remember most vividly and weave this further understanding into the understanding of their stories and their own autobiographies.

This project has been funded by the Impact II Teachers Network for three years, and teachers in ESL, Special Education, and Theater Arts have had the opportunity to adapt this program to meet the needs of their students. In 1986, students met with the librarian to make Life Cycle posters using art and poetry to illustrate the stages, and many more such adaptations are possible.

During the years I have taught Growing Through Literature, I have been a member of the Educators' Forum and have had the opportunity to discuss with colleagues problems and progress. Their encouragement and support have helped me to grow as a teacher and to continue asking questions and finding answers.